



Shannie Goldstein Transcript

ABE LOUISE YOUNG: This is a recording for Women Who Dared, a project of the Jewish Women's Archive. Today's date is January 12th, 2005. This is an interview of Shannie Goldstein. Shannie, would you spell your last name for me, please?

SHANNIE GOLDSTEIN: G-O-L-D-S-T-E-I-N.

ALY: Thank you. The interview is conducted by Abriel Young at Shannie Goldstein's home in New Orleans, Louisiana. This is disc number one of one. (pause) So Shannie, can you tell me briefly about your childhood?

SG: Well, I was born on February 27th, 1943, in Brooklyn, New York, Crown Heights Hospital, where my father was an intern in medical school. And he was drafted into the war, and my mother and I, I guess just sort of hung out (laughter) in a variety of places while he was a doctor in the army. And there was family -- my father's family had settled in Lowell, Massachusetts. So, that was supposed to be a good place to go to once you got off the boat from Poland, and -- so that's where we settled, or at least they settled. So my father was a doctor, and I was the oldest of five children, and since my mother had five children in seven years, there was... not much of a childhood. (Laughter) My recollections are of always having one brother or sister with me, or more, at all times. But we did -- not like today, but we used to go out and play after school, and we just played in the neighborhood. And that's pretty much the way my childhood went. My father, as I said, was a doctor, but he was also a family practitioner, which means that he delivered babies on kitchen tables, and went to see patients at 3:00 o'clock in the morning who were sick, and I remember more than one time being called down to help shovel out the driveway so he could (laughter) get to see a patient, right away! And I guess that was probably the beginning of my volunteerism (laughter) efforts.



(Laughter) Because it was definitely volunteer -- volunteer on command. But we all tried to help him out. I mean, he could get dressed faster than anyone I ever knew -- even Superman couldn't do it that fast -- to get out to see somebody sick. But Lowell, Massachusetts was not a center for Jewish education by any means... but for my parents, it was extremely important. For my parents, Jewish education was of primary importance. My father was a Zionist, as was my mother, and the study of the Hebrew language was very, very important to him. Higher education in Hebrew was not available in Lowell, so my parents, especially my mother, would drive me to the outskirts of Boston to private teachers on Sundays, and I would take private lessons and study. And when I was, I guess about eight years old, I went to a wonderful Hebrew camp, called Camp Yavneh. And I was invited to come along as a girlfriend of my father's friend, who was the director of the camp. And she wanted a playmate for her daughter, who was also about eight or nine years old, who I knew already, from many visits to Lowell. And so, I became very -- I loved, I just loved, the people I met there, at the camp. They were wonderful, they were warm, they were accepting... and just terrific people. And so I began to look forward to these summers at camp, and once I became a freshman in high school, the question was to go to Lowell High School, and continue having private lessons -- or what I wanted to do was to go to the Hebrew high school in Boston, and be with these wonderful people that I had met at camp. So I needed to pass an entrance exam to the Hebrew high school, and I studied and studied and studied and studied for a whole summer to pass that exam, and I did. And then, the question was, well, now what? Because the Hebrew high school began after your other high school -- your secular high school. So, the decision was made to send me to Brookline High School, and my father had a very distant cousin that lived in Brookline, and they agreed to rent me a room and take me in. I rented a room, I ate breakfast there, I don't know -- and I went to high school, and then from high school, from Brookline High School, I got on the streetcar and took myself down to the Hebrew high school, and that was quite... that was very difficult, but very important.



ALY: How old were you at that time?

SG: I was thirteen, barely thirteen.

ALY: And how far is Boston from Lowell -- or Brookline, from Lowell?

SG: Brookline from Lowell was about an hour on the train. But it was -- by the time I got out of Hebrew high school, it was too late to get a train to Lowell. So I couldn't commute from home to Brookline every day, I really had to stay there and then just come home on weekends.

ALY: You were determined.

SG: I guess so, because my mother dropped me off in front of the high school on the first day of school, and I really did not know a single person, and it was a huge... I mean, I was shy (laughter) and quiet. And that took an awful lot of courage, but I really, really wanted to be with these wonderful people at the Hebrew high school. And so I was willing to do all that, and I knew it was very important to my parents that I did it, also. So, that was my childhood. Period. (Laughter) Study, study, study, study, study!

ALY: Good to be a teacher later, when you studied so hard.

SG: Study! That's it, just study!

ALY: And where -- did you continue your education after high school?

SG: I went to -- I graduated from Brookline High School in 1960, and I went on to go to the Hebrew College, the Boston Hebrew College, and Boston University -- these are simultaneous programs -- and, again, I rented rooms, didn't have a dorm life, or any college life, I didn't know campus life, I've never known a campus life (laughter) -- and just studied. Studied, and went to school, and went to school, and took exams, wrote papers -- but I loved it. I mean, I loved being with these friends. We were like a family,



because these other students also came from all surrounding areas of Boston, and from all walks of life. We never knew who had money, who didn't have money -- you know, they were just -- we were just all doing the same thing: studying, and having... just, friendships with one another. We were like family. And in my junior year, I went to Israel as a reward for hanging in there through the sophomore year in the Hebrew College, that we got scholarships to go to Israel, to study in Israel for our junior year. And I went. And that was the place that I met my husband David. And that was in 1962.

ALY: Can you tell me about that meeting?

SG: Well he was a student in the same school, but he was taking a year off from the Hebrew Union College studies, his studies, to become a Rabbi. And so he was not there to be a serious student, because he didn't need the credit for graduation, as I did. But we were in the same school. And it was a very small school. And there were students from everywhere in the country -- even from South America. So, these were all students, some of whom I did know and I was in school with at Boston, and others I did not know, but we love each other to this day, because we shared this incredible experience for so many years together.

ALY: In Israel?

SG: In Israel, but also, coming through the high school, and the college, and then in Israel...

ALY: (inaudible)?

SG: Yes. And then, once you got back after that third year, you just had one more year to go to graduate, and so most people hung in there one more year.

ALY: What was the name of the college in Israel?



SG: In Israel it was called the Machon-Greenberg. The Greenberg Institute for Hebrew teachers.

ALY: M-A-H-O-N?

SG: M-A-C-H-O-N.

ALY: Thank you. (pause) Did going to Israel affect, or change, or influence your Judaism at all?

SG: I don't think so. I was always a Zionist. My father was an ardent Zionist. And he loved Hebrew -- he was also a student at the Hebrew Teachers College, but he left to go to college in Maine, to Bates College in Maine -- and then, of course, to medical school, and so on. So he did not graduate. But... I don't think that that experience changed the way I felt about Judaism. I would really have to think hard about that, if it changed it. I mean, of course, Israel became a reality, rather than just a word at home, and of course Israel, at that time, people were very idealistic. Israel was a very young state -- I mean, we're talking about 1962 (cough) excuse me -- where so many of the people were Holocaust survivors, kibbutz life was very strong... People really did dance in the streets, you know. (Laughter) It was a different Israel from today. It was primitive -- we didn't have the comforts that you can have today... you know, a can of tuna fish was more precious than a fillet. (Laughter) So, if anybody wanted to bring you a wonderful gift, just bring tuna fish. Tuna fish and toilet paper!

ALY: That's very funny.

SG: Yeah. (Laughter)

ALY: I'm going to be -- while you're speaking, I will (laughter) -- I can only laugh silently, so that it does not record onto the background of your voice. But, that is very funny. And if you see me go like this, it means "explain a little bit more about what you've just said."



Or if you've said a Hebrew or Yiddish word that I don't know, it means "can you give me a definition?"

SG: Okay. Okay.

ALY: I feel like you are the kind of person for whom your Jewish values and your sense of spirituality permeates your life. But I wonder if you could articulate a little bit about how it's influenced your choices and the path of your life?

SG: Well, first of all, (pause) my parents were very, very involved in the Jewish community of Lowell, Massachusetts. I mean, my father was always at a meeting regarding the Hebrew school. He wanted to upgrade it; he wanted to expand Jewish education. He had lots of opposition by most of the people that really didn't care that much. Now remember, this was in the '50s. It's much different now. So, his example, and my mother's as well, was to be passionate about something, and then to do it, even if it's just -- even if it's hard. And my parents also were very, they were very giving -- they enjoyed just giving to others, reaching out to others. That's just the way they were. And so, yes, it was part of my being Jewish, but it's just the way I was raised, and since Judaism was central to our family, they had to be connected. There was no way not to. So, I don't know where one ends and the other begins, but they are very, very connected. Now that doesn't mean that if I were not Jewish, that I might not be the same way, but, since I am (laughter) and since Judaism is so central in my life, and as I grew up, I mean, that's really -- I sought so much, I mean, there was always room for one more at the table, a stranger, somebody who, you know, was coming through town, or... that's just the way my mother was, and my father. They were very generous in giving of themselves for the betterment of the community. That's for sure. So that's, I think -- does that answer the question?

ALY: It does.



SG: Yeah.

ALY: When you say, "That's just the way I am," can you tell me a little bit more about what that way is? (Laughter)

SG: (Laughter) It's hard for me to describe myself, it's very, very hard for me to describe myself. I don't know, I don't know.

ALY: That's fine. I think a picture will emerge, from the whole. (Laughter)

SG: (Laughter) From the whole? I know that I get a great deal of pleasure out of reaching out to others. I'm very timid, really, so that -- I usually am led by my husband, who always seems to choose things to involve us that are very important. And so, my following him always leads me in the right direction and gives me a tremendous sense of purpose in life. And we've been married now for 40 years, and I think that purpose in life is so essential. And I think that I've been blessed because of what he does, and the roads that he has taken, that have enabled me to have tremendous purpose in my life, outside of the usual, raising children, and, you know, personal things, but --

ALY: Can you say more about what that sense of purpose is, or is like?

SG: Well -- being married to a rabbi, I think, for 40 years, does enable purpose in life (laughter) by its definition.

ALY: How do you connect to the congregation?

SG: I'm very connected, I am very connected. And when we started out, it was very important for the wife of the rabbi to be involved. But, I didn't need to be the wife of the Rabbi to feel a sense of, of wanting to reach out to others. I would be that way anyway, because that's the example that I got from my parents. But, being married to a rabbi, or this rabbi -- let's say this rabbi -- gave me lots of opportunities to do it, in many different



venues. And, I would say there's never a dull moment, and there's never a reason for boredom -- I mean, there's just so much to do and there's just never enough time to do everything you want to do. But I think looking back, the things that I feel most proud of were because he is a rabbi and because I felt involved -- because in those days, husbands and wives did things that way (laughter), you know? That's the way we did it. It was a mom-and-pop store. So I didn't have any goals for being anything that wasn't connected to what he was doing, and fortunately my interests were Hebrew. That's how we met, that's what we have in common -- I mean, we have our backgrounds in common of course, but that's something that we have that we both love. And so his work gave me the venue to teach Hebrew -- because the synagogue needed a teacher as well -- here I am! (Laughter) And so that's what I did. And I never thought that I should be going to law school, or being someone in my own right -- I mean, that's just where I came from. My mother would work side by side with my father in the office, in his office, but she was not paid a salary for it -- that's just what you did in those days, and that's just the way I did it too! And I often tell her, when she tells me, "You have to slow down a little bit," I say, "But Mom. You taught me how to be like this!" And so, I guess that's the way I am.

ALY: It seems like you and your husband are really linked by a sense of mission in life, and that's a really beautiful glue for a relationship. I wonder if you see -- or did you want to respond to that? I wonder if you see your work -- it sounds to me like you've seen your work as fitting in to a traditional woman's role?

SG: Yes, but... yes. On the other hand, as a person who also wanted to have a very good marriage, I felt that I needed to be involved with that which was very important to him. Because if I don't know what he's doing and who he's doing it with and the people that he is involved with in his work, then I can't be very connected to him. Because being a rabbi is not a job, it's a lifestyle. It's a life, it's a total life commitment. There is no time off, it's twenty-four and seven, this is the way his way of being a rabbi is, to this day. And



if we were going to be close as a couple, I needed to be involved. And it's paid off, because after 40 years, I have to say it's still very, very sweet. So, for whatever it is that keeps a couple very in love, but also loving one another, then maybe that's what it was, but (laughter) -- now I'm not saying it was easy, but to me, it was very important.

ALY: Aw, that's very, very dear.

SG: Very, very important.

ALY: Did you have opportunities to also challenge -- or did you have desire or opportunities to also challenge the traditional roles that women were given or allowed?

SG: Well, as you know, my generation is the bridge generation between being the traditional, you know, '50s wife and mother, where (makes masculine voice) "no wife of mine is going to work!" and having a daughter who's an attorney, and a daughter-in-law who's a rabbi! So, I am the bridge! (Laughter) And it's very confusing to be a bridge, because you don't know where you're supposed to be. And so I've ventured off on my own as a social worker, a clinical social worker, but my priority is always my husband and his work and my children -- and I don't mean that to sound like a martyr, I mean seriously -- I've been teaching Hebrew at Tulane for twenty-something years, and been a social worker for sixteen, but I still consider my number one place is to be my husband's wife and my children's mother. And my grandchildren's grandma.

ALY: Woohoo! That's fun!

SG: (Laughter) That's the sweet part -- that's the sweet part, is the grandchildren. (Laughter) Yeah. I mean, I don't know what else to say about that. You know, I wonder. My mother, who is really a lovely woman, and is 87 years old, was admitted to Radcliffe College, way back when. But she could neither afford to go to Radcliffe College, even on a scholarship, nor could she really do it, because she had to work to take care of her elderly parents. Both my parents were the only children born in America,



and both were the youngest of many children. And I often wonder, if she were -- what would she be, what would she have done, if she had been able to self-actualize? What would I have done, if my parents had said, "Now before you get married, you must be able to support yourself," or, you know, "Be a doctor, be a lawyer, go into a business." But in those days, for a woman, it was go to college until you got married -- then you could teach, be a secretary or a nurse. And I wonder, you know, what would have become of me if I were born to myself? Because my daughter is a lawyer in New York City, self-sufficient, independent, and at thirty-two got married last month to a lovely guy, a terrific guy. And... you know, you just wonder. I mean, here's my mother. How smart was she? To get into Radcliffe, in those days?

ALY: Incredible!

SG: And yet, not to ever have gone -- well, she went to the University of Connecticut for a few years, but that was not what was important then. It was 'get married and have children.' And the same thing for me: most of my contemporaries were getting married two weeks after they graduated from high school. And yet my father's sisters were almost all college graduates. Go figure. Go figure.

ALY: It's an incredible question, what would have become of me if I were born to myself -- that is just, that is a question that can be pondered for a thousand years, by every succeeding generation.

SG: Yes, yes.

ALY: It's really quite amazing.

SG: You can add that to your list of interview questions. (Laughter)

ALY: (inaudible) I'm going to write a poem about that.



SG: Ooh! (Laughter)

ALY: I'll send it to you if I do it.

SG: OK! Oh, I'd like that.

ALY: Does the concept of tikkun olam move you?

SG: Oh, sure. Sure. I mean, the whole idea of leaving the world -- making the world better than the way you came into it. But I'm not sure how -- it just seems like it's an idea that each person should feel personally that the idea of doing good things will improve the world, so it's an extension, as I see it, of mitzvah, of doing a mitzvah -- fulfilling a commandment, which of course today, we think of it as doing a good deed. Well, if everybody did a good deed every day, how much better would the world be? I mean, then we're talking about tikkun olam. And so the more we try to give to others and to do something nice and help others, then I think tikkun olam is going to follow. And why some people just don't see it that way, I guess that's human nature. Goes back to -- back to the Bible, you know, when one brother was against another, and... I guess that's Mother Nature at work. But I do believe in tikkun olam, very much so, and hope that I'm living up to my philosophical ideals and expectations in some small way, in some small way -- but those would be personal things I guess.

ALY: (pause) Tell me why Jewish education is needed.

SG: Well, why is Jewish education needed? Because people need to know who they are. And if I am a woman, then I need to know about being a woman. And if I am a Jew, then I need to know about being a Jew. And ignorance is a very bad thing. Now, the question is, how much do I need to know? (Laughter) So that's infinite! But, I feel Jewish education is extremely important. Now, there are all kinds of aspects of Jewish education, all different venues and fields -- I mean, whether it's music, or history, or Hebrew, or culture. But, we need to know about, you know, who we are. And I don't



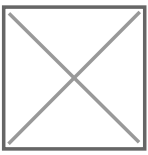
think that people really know who they are when it comes to being Jewish. I mean, I don't mean that globally, I just -- when you ask, "How important is Jewish education?" Well, I think it's extremely important. And that's at all levels, whether it's learning to read and being literate, or taking, you know, studying in the great academies, but it is important, it's extremely important.

ALY: What led you to the refusenik movement in the Soviet Union?

SG: I was thinking about that... when David and I lived in Baltimore, Maryland, he was the senior rabbi at Baltimore Hebrew Congregation.

ALY: When was that?

SG: This was 19 -- well, we got there in '68, so by now it was the early '70s. And Jews were beginning to try to leave the Soviet Union -- don't forget this was during the days of Communism. And it was, it was under the Helsinki Accord, which allowed people who had been separated from family members during the Second World War to rejoin their families, so that Jews in the Soviet Union were now seeking to leave the Soviet Union under Communism -- which was horrifying for Jews, because of the antisemitism -- and trying to unite with family in Israel. Now, since all Jews are a family, the idea was to find someone who would say, "Hey, I'm looking for this relative," and bring them to Israel. Now, the idea of "refusenik" came when the application for a visa to exit the Soviet Union, to unite with family members in Israel, was refused. It's just as simple as that, a refusal. Now the people that... the Jews of the Soviet Union -- I mean, everybody in the Soviet Union were slaves, I mean, we know that, under Communism. But the Jews were, to quote one of the refuseniks, "slaves of slaves." And, as bad as life was for most people -- and everyone in the Soviet Union who was not part of, you know, the higher element... it was even worse for Jews. Now, in 1967, when Israel fought the Six Day War (pause; break in tape) Now also when the 1967 war broke out, the newspapers in the Soviet Union showed photographs of strong, young Israeli soldiers. And they began to identify



with these strong, young, determined Jewish men and women. And at that point, they began to feel that this is what they want -- they want to be in Israel, they want to part of this, and they want to leave the Soviet Union. And that's how it started. So, at the beginning, in the early 1970's, Ari and Sarah were very little. I mean, I guess they were very little (laughter) -- in the early '70s, Sarah had just been born, practically, in '72, and Ari must have been, you know, five -- or he's two and a half years older than she is, so... I remember him sitting in the little car seat. They didn't have car seats then like we do now, they had little booster seats that you could attach to your seatbelt. I mean, we didn't even have seatbelts then, really. (laughter) So, I don't know how any of our children lived to become adults with no seatbelts, no car seats -- I mean, how did we do it? And so, I began to help relocate any Soviet Jews that came to Baltimore. And I would pick them up -- they would barely get off the boat, and I would meet them at a place where they were staying -- you know, the Federation in Baltimore would rent out a couple of rooms in certain motels, and those were the headquarters. And I would go with my kids, pick people up, and try to help them to find apartments, take them to the grocery store, teach them how to be in America. Help them find furniture, help them find clothes, help them find whatever they needed -- help them get settled in Baltimore. And, that was in the mid-70s. And so I was really already quite immersed in the whole movement. When we came to New Orleans, it was 1978, and shortly after that, David became the chairman of the CRC, the Community Relations Commission, and a board member of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. And someone here said to him, "You know, you're going to be on this board. You really need to go to see for yourself." So he came home one day and he said, "I'm going to the Soviet Union to see for myself." And I said, "You're not going without me." And that's how I got (pause) that. But. I felt -- I mean, I was already so really involved that I really wanted to go. And by now the movement was in full swing. Now it was in full swing. And we had learned about these very heroic people in the Soviet Union who were really exposing themselves by asking to leave the Soviet Union, that there was great danger for them if they would apply for an exit visa --



and not only dangerous for themselves personally, but for their relatives, their children, their friends -- and they would now be tagged by the KGB. Now, we don't know -- there's no KGB anymore. But the KGB was the secret police. And if you exposed yourself to be a Zionist, then that means you were anti-Soviet, and you were a traitor! So that -- I mean, it was terribly dangerous. And yet, these people, these Jews in the Soviet Union -- not all the Jews of the Soviet Union, but these particular ones, that wanted to go to Israel -- were in terrible danger. And they wanted to learn Hebrew, so that when they got to Israel they'd be able to speak Hebrew. When they wanted to learn the culture -- I mean, they never learned Hebrew. So they would meet in secret groups. Now, that doesn't sound like much. But when you are being followed by the KGB, and all of a sudden the KGB or a neighbor of someone would say, "You know, the people next door, always having friends over. They keep on coming." Well, the KGB -- "and they're Jews!" You know? The KGB then decides to investigate, and what they come up with -- the truth of the matter is that these are people who are refuseniks, who are trying to learn to read Hebrew, to speak Hebrew. And it was something that was very, very courageous, very courageous. And when we signed on to go, our job, our mission really, was to try to smuggle in teaching materials for them. So, these teaching materials were books, were tapes, of Hebrew music. They were puzzles, Hebrew puzzles for children. And... I enjoy playing the guitar, you know, very primitive, but this is something that I've always loved is Hebrew music, folk music. And so I was going to go to represent myself as a person who was eager to learn Russian folk music. And David was a professor at Tulane, and he was going to -- not be a rabbi, but rather be a professor at Tulane who was studying, and he was an academic. And we were going to go then to the Soviet Union and try to smuggle in these books and things.

ALY: How were you hiding them?

SG: Well, we just pretty much took them with us, carried them with us, but the thing that we really had to hide was the names of the people that we were going to connect up with



once we got there. Because if those names were to be discovered, or revealed, then the KGB would, we'd all be -- I mean, the worst thing that could really happen to us, we thought, was that they'd send us back, you know, back home. But what would happen to these people could be Siberia, could be prison, could be detention, could be all kinds of bad things. I mean, we knew that going in. So we had to, in some way, put their names -- these were going to be our contacts. These were the leading refuseniks, these were the ones who were at the center of everything. And we were going to meet with them. We got their names through the head of the agency for Soviet Jewry, and -- but we were told, "Do not bring any names, addresses, or phone numbers into the Soviet Union. Get rid of them in France when you change planes." How would we remember? So I would, for example, take my checkbook, and I would write out three letters on a check. I'd write on three checks later, I would write the other half of the name. I would write half of a phone number down -- David would write something on one page of his date book, and four pages later he would write the other half of the name, or the address. I mean, we would have a guidebook to Russia, and under a restaurant we would put a phone number. This was just terrifying, because we didn't want them to have a problem. So we were very careful about this.

ALY: How did the Jews that you went to meet with in the Soviet Union receive you?

SG: Well first of all, I have to tell you that going through Customs -- right now, since 9/11, we are subjected to wandering and searching, and before they kind of got it down to where it was, you know, kind of universal all over the airports, you had random searches, and I mean, there were these horror stories about how people were being searched. We don't know searching, unless you've been through a search by the KGB. And going through Customs... they looked at every little thing in your luggage, they pulled out the linings, they opened up your makeup and took everything apart to make sure you weren't hiding anything. They, when they saw the books that we brought in, they confiscated them, and -- I mean, I can't begin to tell you. I mean, I had no idea, this had never



happened to me before. And there was not just one inspector, but there would be one, and he'd call another official, "What is this, what do you think this is?" And then they'd call another one, and you thought, "Oh, God. What are they finding, what are they doing?" And I'll never forget one thing, though, that I -- oh, I can't believe I did it, but I did it -- was that they were going through my music that I had copied, in order to bring it there, Hebrew songs, and they wanted to know, you know, what's this and what's this, and all I remember is that when they turned their backs, I threw it all back into the case, and I pushed the guitar down and I closed the case, and I got it in. Cha-ching! (Laughter) Everything else they confiscated. If you were going to bring a Bible in, they confiscated it. They weren't stealing it, you can get it when you're leaving! And you filled out papers, and you could get it when you left. Which we did! We got it when we left. But -- boy. You know, it doesn't take much to make a person happy. You know? When I sneaked that stuff back into my case (laughter), I was so happy! But this search detained us for two and a half hours. So you got the feeling right then and there that this was not -- that this was serious. Very serious. So when we got there, we began to contact people. And we contacted one person -- we were instructed, "Go to a pay phone. Stick a dime in the pay phone." It would work. And just, all you had to say was, "This is David Goldstein," or "This is Shannie Goldstein. Ahava sent us." Now Ahava might have been the person that was there last, before us. So that meant you were to be trusted, you were safe, it was OK. And from that time, we began to set up meetings with the refuseniks. And, I mean -- what is your, your -- oh, that's a... And, we'd have one lead that would go to another lead, and these meetings were the things that, I mean, I will never forget, as long as I live. Because, we really didn't know what it meant to be a prisoner in your own country.

ALY: What was the impact of your coming on the people that you met with?

SG: They -- for them, we were the link to the outside world, who would get the word out about what was really happening. So we would meet secretly with them. We were told



not to talk in our rooms. We were told the only place we could talk freely would be outside. When we went to people's houses we would write things on paper, or each one would have -- and I'm not talking about a house, like the house we live in -- these were apartments that were about the size of this kitchen, that had four or five people living in them. And a lot of times people would share a kitchen, families would share a kitchen. These were more like projects, not like homes, so you have to understand how bad the living conditions were. And their lifeline was us. But we couldn't talk on the telephone about anything except what time we'll meet and where we'll meet. We had to be very careful to not mention names of anybody, anytime, any place. You never knew if you were being followed, in a taxicab -- we wouldn't have someone take us to the place we were going, which could have been, you know, a half hour or an hour out of Moscow. But rather drop us off here, and then we would walk to the apartment. We never knew when we were being followed, but after a while we began to realize that we were probably always followed. But in terms of our being there for them, it was a lifeline. I mean, we took it very seriously, this was a passion for us -- our first trip was in 1981, then in 1983 we went back... by the time we went in 1986, we were already being -- our names had already been in the Pravda newspaper for being Zionist provocateurs, or CIA agents. And we were amazed that they let us back in. But, now -- I mean, this is now over six years, so things were beginning -- they were always changing a little, so on the one hand, at a certain point, they didn't want to be known as a refusenik. After a while, they wanted to become known, because, I mean, this was their strategy. But in between, people were sent to prison, to Siberia, for trying to study Hebrew, or teaching Hebrew -- that was a code for wanting to go to Israel. So, I mean, we can't see it as the way things are in Russia now, but remember, this was during Communism. So, they took the greatest risk of all in being with us. And yet, they needed to be with us, because this was the only way information would get out. Now, what kind of information perhaps might... well, first of all, they needed the world to know what was happening to them. They needed all our Senators, and Congressmen, and they needed lobbying, you know, to



influence Gorbachev, and all those people out there. But also, people's names needed to get out, so that someone could request reunification. So if the name didn't get out, then they couldn't be reunited. It's by request, you know, like, "I'm looking for, you know... Rose... Minsk. We want her to be with us, we're family." So, I don't remember if it was the first visit or the second visit. But people -- ugh, there's so much to tell. We would find ourselves with groups of people in a room this size, maybe 50 or 60 people squeezed in, knowing that we were coming, that we were going to be there. And they could tell this story, and give us a slip of paper with a name on it, and a telephone number, of who they were. So that we could get that name out and submit it. Well, how do we get this out? We're searched coming in, we're searched the same way going out -- I mean, they knew what we were doing, they searched us... so I had an idea. And my idea was that we would go to the nationally approved gift shop, where they, you know, these little boxes and dolls and things like that were sold. And once they seal it up in that shop, then it's Customs-cleared. OK? So I thought, all right, what I'm going to do, is I'm going to take -- and I must have had 10 or 15 of these -- after all, I had a lot of people to bring gifts home to, right?

ALY: Rich American!

SG: Absolutely, I needed to spend some money there, and bring some, you know, bring it home. So I went into the ladies' room before we left and I carefully, carefully untaped all the boxes, and into the boxes I put the names of the people, and then just sealed that tape right up again. And... It just passed through like a charm! (Laughter)

ALY: That's -- amazing!

SG: How little Shannie Goldstein from Lowell, Massachusetts fooled the KGB. (Laughter) But, once we got home -- I mean, it was not like going to Rome or to London -- you unpack and you do the laundry and, you know, you go about your business. We had work to do. We had work to do. And, we stayed -- I mean, we stayed in close touch



with the refuseniks that we met, who became dear, dear, dear, dear friends. And we called them on the phone, and they would be in a telephone booth somewhere in Moscow or Leningrad in the freezing tundra, and we would be talking to them from David's office, on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. And -- but we were in close contact, to give them moral support constantly. And I have to say that those years -- it was a very depressing time, because you felt that sense of guilt -- that you could come and go, they couldn't. That I come back to my, you know, wonderful home and my wonderful friends and my life and my freedom, you know, and that they, they were stuck there, and it was getting worse and worse and worse and worse before it got better. I mean, really worse and worse before it got better. And friends of ours were being imprisoned. Dear friends. Now if you want to talk about women who dared to take risks, you're talking about the women of the Soviet -- the refusenik women. Because, they were the strength and the support of the men, and when the men got shipped off to Siberia, I mean -- going to a prison in Siberia, you don't get into your car and you say, you know, "Let's go, we'll spend the weekend in Siberia," you know? (Laughter) You have a train, and that takes several hours. And then you have to take a bus, and that takes several hours or days. And then you get off and you walk in the freezing, freezing cold, to the prison camp. And you don't go with, you know, with your luggage on wheels, like we go -- you carry bags, and in the bags are clothes for the prisoner, food... anything that you can carry. And these are the women, the female refuseniks. And they didn't know from one day to the next what would happen to their loved ones, and it wasn't just "Okay, it's your husband, so you take care of it." People were so united and such a community to take care of each other. And so that if a woman went to see her husband or her brother in a prison camp, then other women would take care of the children and the old parents. But they were so united -- and one day, they went as a group to the Kremlin. Wow, yeah. That was a wow. My friends, banging the door down to be heard. This is raw courage, raw courage. So, you know, when I think of myself getting any recognition for being a woman who dared, I say, "This is nothing. They are the ones who



should be getting the awards.” And all they wanted was freedom -- freedom to be Jews, freedom to study Hebrew, freedom to go to Israel -- freedom to go wherever they wanted -- but to live as Jews. And at such great risk, in the Soviet Union. I mean, you know, the stories of men, mostly men, women too, who were scientists and mathematicians -- I mean, really great geniuses walking in -- applying to go to Israel, being refused, and walking into their job the next day and finding the desk is gone. Not only is his desk gone, but his cousin! Musicians who were teaching at academies and conservatories in Moscow and in Leningrad and all over were laid off, once they -- and they were great musicians. And now that they're in Israel, there's some beautiful music.

ALY: It sounds like an incredible time, and what a gift for you to have been able to just be -- even be present, not to mention what you brought, in terms of your knowledge and support. And what you received sounds like...

SG: Ah. A purpose in life.

ALY: -- hugely, priceless.

SG: Yeah. And it just, you know, it was really a gift to be able to be part of this time. I mean, these people are true heroes. I mean, it's very hard to understand. It wasn't short-term, you know, where it was over in a month. We're talking about years of this. And food was in short supply, so that -- and yet, wherever we went, I don't know where it came from, but food always came out of a kitchen. And if there were 20 people, 20 people ate, if there were 10 people, 10 people ate, if there 30 people, there was, 30 people ate. One interesting thing too is that there was a very precious young couple whose parents we had met, and they wanted to be married, and they wanted to be married by a rabbi. And so when we were there, they asked David if he would perform the wedding ceremony for them, and we took the curtain down off the window... yeah. Curtain down off the window, held it up for a chuppah, and they were married. And then, there was a little feast! (laughter)



ALY: That is incredible!

SG: Is that incredible?

ALY: Oh, truly incredible.

SG: Yeah, yeah. And, I mean, we just -- we went from one place to the next, one group to the next. They were all friends, they all knew each other, but we just went from one place to the next, and -- we'd come home, I mean, long after the Metro shut down, we'd be walking the streets of Moscow trying to get home (laughter), somehow.

ALY: I wonder if I could just -- I would love to hear about this all night long, but I'm conscious of our time rolling on, and that's a beautiful story to end this section on. I just have three or four more questions -- it looks like we have about ten minutes.

SG: OK.

ALY: The three subjects, I'll just tell you so you can think of them and see if they weave together in your mind at all. The first would be role models that you've had in your work. If you'd had any powerful figures inspire you either as a young person or as a person at this age. I see that the Rabbi Goldstein has been quite an influential figure --

SG: Inspiration and an influence, yes. Absolutely. I would say that. Yeah.

ALY: Anyone else that you'd like to mention?

SG: Not -- I don't think so. I think he is the strongest and the one.

ALY: And the two other subjects are whether or not you participated in the movement for women's rights during the '70s and '80s, which is ongoing --

SG: Ongoing, yeah.



ALY: -- and if you see that as connected to your Jewish values at all, or if -- what role (break in tape) --

SG: Oh, I have to say --

ALY: The questions I asked -- I'll just recount them again for the tape -- are about your role models, you counted your husband as your strongest role model --

SG: He is definitely, without a doubt, my strongest role model and inspiration and influence for doing important things.

ALY: Beautiful. Then I was asking about the movement for women's rights, and what connection you see between Judaism and empowerment of women. And then your experiences with breast cancer.

SG: Honestly, Abe, I really -- I don't know... I'm not an extremist on either side. I just feel like I'm either being swept by the tide -- I want to be supportive. I think it's terribly important for women to have rights, equal rights, with men in the workplace. But at the same time I really do believe that women -- women need to be women and do what women do, in nurturing and taking care of the home. But in terms of being able to take care of herself and not be at the mercy of a man who can treat her badly, I mean, that's where -- I don't know if being Jewish has anything to do with that, but rather being a woman and saying, "Wait a minute, there's something wrong with this picture. Women should not be treated like that." And, so, it's a balancing act between being a mother and a wife -- and whatever that means -- and standing up and saying, you know, women need to be treated with respect and kindness. We can give a lot if we're partners. You know, the best can come out of men and women if we're equals, the best marriages are between equals. The best partnerships are between equals, so, I don't know if that answers the question, but that comes to my mind.



ALY: It does, thank you. And, are you interested in speaking about the experience with surviving breast cancer?

SG: Breast cancer? It was terrifying, but not as terrifying as going to the Soviet Union. (Laughter) I mean, I had so much support here from friends, and of course there were so many women who've gone through so much worse than I. I mean, I have wonderful care and I had wonderful doctors and I got so much support. Yes, it's scary! Scary, scary, scary, scary, scary. But... knowing -- I don't know, maybe it's because I'm older, maybe, I don't know, maybe because I was so young then -- it was scary, going there. I mean, at the end, or as we kept going back, by the third time we went back to the Soviet Union, I mean, I had so many people that I knew and I wanted to bring things for everybody, so I would go to stores and I would buy, you know, ten pairs of jeans, because I had one for this person and everybody wanted jeans. And sweaters and this and that and children's clothes and diapers and -- I don't know, rubber pants, or anything -- things that I knew that they needed. And we brought more luggage for two people who were going to be away for a week, or ten days, or two weeks -- we were gone for two weeks -- and I would unpack and stack everything in the closets in the hotel room. And when we would leave the hotel room, I would neatly wrap -- because I had brought tissue paper, and ribbon, you know, to wrap things, and bring them as gifts to everybody that we went to visit. And I mean, we're talking about 30 or 40 people. So I had so much. Well, at a certain point the maids began to wonder, where were these clothes disappearing? (Laughter) And because, after five days, I had two sweaters, you know, one pair of pants... (Laughter) And of course, all my stuffed animals -- I had this stuffed animal fetish that I came in with -- there wasn't one left. (Laughter) Where did all these things disappear to?

ALY: (Laughter) That's pretty funny. Our tape is going to run out shortly, but I want to just offer you the opportunity if there's anything that you haven't said that you want to say, or if there's anything that you want to say as a message to other young Jewish women who may be visiting this site and trying to learn about their role and their



heritage?

SG: Oh, I don't know.

ALY: We have great material, as it is -- we don't need any more.

SG: I don't know. I mean, I could just tell more and more stories, but -- just do, you know. There's plenty to do -- if it's not for this, then let it be for this. You can't be everywhere all at one time. (Pause) But, I mean, I will always cherish for ever and ever that time in my life because it was so full of purpose. As hard as it was -- every day, to be waiting and waiting and waiting for news, news of this one, of that one, people would come with messages, I mean, they were secret messages that would come through diplomatic pouches -- I mean, it was constantly on top of my mind, and David's, and I think it was a very good thing for our children, even though it was maybe difficult for them -- at the time, they were children.

ALY: Did you bring them? Or did you go without them?

SG: No. No, we went without them. But I think that it instilled in them some very wonderful, important values for their lives, that we perhaps were role models for them. Because Sarah, and her husband Howard, are very, you know, active in the Jewish community. And Ari and Hannah, I mean, are both rabbis! So, I'm hoping --

ALY: At two different congregations?

SG: No, she's upraising her children. But she's a poet, and a writer -- a Hebrew poet and writer, and an academic, and... so I don't think that's terribly profound, what I've said in any way, but there's so much, so much to do. And I really need to get busy doing something more. (Laughter)

[END OF INTERVIEW]